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SUBJECT: CLARIFICATION OF SARG STANCE ON REFUGEES

Classified By: CDA Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.5 b/d

11. (C) Summary. A Syrian MFA official notified the Charge that the SARG was unwilling on political grounds to allow processing of refugee referrals at the U.S. Embassy in Syria. He said there was no bilateral political basis for such agreement and cited a litany of "facts" to further support the refusal: the USG had not responded positively to the SARG's willingness to engage on the refugee issue; the SARG believed the USG had strong-armed European countries not to provide assistance to Iraqi refugees in Syria; and the USG was encouraging Iraqis to enter Syria from third countries to seek resettlement in the U.S. and then was refusing 25 percent of applicants. When the Charge protested the above as patently incorrect, the MFA official implied a possible solution to the current impasse was the USG interviewing UNHCR refugee referrals in a third country, or the possibility of a "technical" visit with an unspecified political aspect which would allow a change in SARG position. End Summary.

12. (C) On September 18, Charge met Husam ed-Din Al-Ala,a, Deputy FM Faisal Mikdad,s chef de cabinet, to request the SARG approve visas for a DHS team to process refugee referrals at the U.S. Embassy. Ala,a stated that the SARG had made a &political8 decision to refuse the visas for the DHS team because of the lack of a &political umbrella8 to support technical collaboration. Ala,a commented that the SARG was disappointed that the dialogue that began with A/S Sauerbrey,s visit to Damascus in March of 2007 and continued at subsequent meetings between USG and SARG officials in Geneva and Sharm e-Sheikh had come to naught. Ala,a said the SARG blamed the USG for having failed to reciprocate SARG concessions like agreeing to receive A/S Sauerbrey, and hosting the recent Iraqi border security working group. Charge countered that A/S Sauerbrey had delivered a non-paper to D/FM Mikdad in Geneva that the SARG had never responded to except in minimalist oral terms.

13. (C) Ala,a elaborated on other erroneous information the SARG had based its negative response on, which the Charge attempted to correct. Ala,a accused the USG of having lobbied European capitals to not provide refugee assistance to the SARG. Ala,a complained that the SARG had hosted many delegations from EU countries in the last six months, all of whom had promised generous assistance packages, but as of yet nothing had materialized. Ala,a commented that when the SARG had followed up with some unnamed Europeans, they were

told the USG had lobbied their capitals not to provide assistance to Syria. Charge pointed to European contributions in Syria and noted it was the USG which was pushing governments to give to the UN appeals. Ala'a said European contributions were paltry given the enormity of the problem and commented that the recent decision to impose a visa requirement on Iraqis was designed to send a "message" to the West that Syria needed more assistance.

14. (C) Ala,a said the SARG was equally concerned that the USG was dumping additional Iraqis in Syria. Ala,a asked if it were true that the USG was directing Iraqis from other countries to come to Syria to be processed for eventual resettlement in the U.S. When told it was not, Ala,a stated that the SARG was told the USG was doing exactly that and was refusing approximately 25 percent of the Iraqis processed. Ala,a said the SARG was concerned with the security and social costs associated with those left behind. Ala,a also regretted that the way the USG referred to the subject of refugee interviewing in Syria led those responsible for the issue in Damascus to believe the USG was only interested in processing Iraqis who had worked for them in Iraq.

15. (C) After the Charge had countered each of his points, Ala'a accepted that his information could be incorrect. Ala,a said the UNHCR had recently raised with D/FM Mikdad the possibility of having U.S. refugee referrals interviewed in a third country. Ala,a stated that initial SARG reaction to the suggestion was positive and opined interviews in third countries may be a solution to the current impasse. He also suggested that a technical visit by DHS "with a political aspect" could be an opportunity to allow processing to proceed. He gave no details when pressed on this option.

16. (C) Commenting on the recent visit of Iraqi PM Maliki, Ala,a said the SARG was surprised at the lack of understanding within the GOI of the true nature of the refugee problem in neighboring countries. Ala,a commented that the trip helped to sensitize PM Maliki but had not as yet resulted in any financial assistance to refugees here in Syria.

17. (C) Ala,a insisted the SARG had, however, established a security mechanism with the Iraqis as a result of the Maliki visit which will result in the SARG responding to any information provided by the Iraqis. Defending recent SARG actions to reduce the foreign fighter flow, Ala,a commented that the SARG had tightened its procedures at POEs to such an extent that it was having an adverse impact on its tourism industry. Ala,a commented that Saudi Arabia and others had subsequently begun a negative media campaign against Syria. Ala,a commented that from the SARG perspective, it was now time for the U.S. to press source countries to do more to stop militants from traveling to Iraq. Ala,a said source countries were much better positioned than Syria to know which of their nationals is a potential threat.

18. (C) Comment. The SARG is taking a harder line on the Iraqi refugee issue as demonstrated by the decision (now postponed) to impose a visa requirement on Iraqis. It is not clear whether Syria will continue to back away from its humanitarian stance, but the message from the MFA is clear that for political reasons the SARG is unprepared to give on U.S. refugee processing in Syria without some political concession. As Syria does not appear ready to cooperate with the U.S. on other issues, it may be unwilling at senior levels to compromise on the refugee track as well, even on a humanitarian basis.

CORBIN